

Aristotle's Account of Courage

Denise Vigani

**Post-Print: Final version published in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 2017, 34(4): 313-330.
<https://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/hpq.html>**

Aristotle's account of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* leaves readers with several unresolved issues. In this paper, I draw out three: 1) questions regarding the scope of the virtue; 2) the extent to which, or even if, the courageous experience fear; and 3) if—and if so, how—Aristotle's distinction between virtue and continence might hold in the case of courage. I argue that there are good reasons to extend the scope of courage beyond the battlefield and risk of life and limb, that Aristotle does not acknowledge the possibility that the courageous experience fear when exercising courage, and that the distinction between continence and virtue can, indeed, hold in the case of courage.

Aristotle's account of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* leaves readers with several unresolved issues. One concerns the scope of the virtue: Is courage restricted to the context of the battlefield? To the risk of life and limb? Another is the extent to which, or even if, the courageous experience fear, and relatedly, whether the possibility of experiencing pain in the exercise of courage is a source of fear for the courageous. Finally, there is the question of if—and if so, how—Aristotle's distinction between virtue and continence might hold in the case of courage. In this paper, I argue for specific ways in which one might resolve these issues on Aristotle's behalf. I argue that there are good reasons to extend the scope of courage beyond the battlefield and risk of life and limb. While the courageous surely experience some fear in some contexts, I contend that Aristotle does not acknowledge the possibility that the courageous experience fear when exercising courage, even when that exercise is painful, although there may be some room in his account for such fear. Finally, I argue that the distinction between continence and virtue can, indeed, hold in the case of courage.

Courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

In II 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle introduces courage as the mean regarding feelings of fear and confidence (1107b1). This gloss reflects two of Aristotle's underlying commitments

regarding virtue in general. The first is to the doctrine of the mean, namely, that virtue is a mean between excess and deficiency. So, Aristotle notes, someone who is excessively confident is not courageous but rash, and someone who has excessive fear and who is deficient in confidence is a coward. The courageous, by contrast, experience the right amount of fear and confidence towards the right things, for the right end, in the right way, and at the right time (1115b17).

The second is to the individuation of virtues according to their objects. This way of individuating the virtues reflects a broader methodology within Aristotle's psychology whereby capacities are individuated according to their objects (DesLauriers 2002, 144). In II 7 Aristotle outlines the objects of several virtues: fear and confidence are the objects of courage, pleasures and pains belong to temperance, the giving and taking of money to generosity, truth-telling to honesty. What kind of thing is an object of a virtue? Aristotle does not say, but given his examples in II 7, he clearly takes 'object' to be a broad category. Contemporary virtue ethicists who have followed Aristotle's methodology typically take an object of a virtue to be something that falls within the virtue's sphere of concern, something to which the virtue demands a response.¹ 'Object' here is construed broadly to include things within the individual, like emotions, things outside the individual, like other people, animals, natural and manmade objects, and even abstract things like knowledge or beauty (Swanton 2003, 20).

Aristotle begins his more detailed treatment of courage in III 6-9 by reiterating that courage is the mean regarding feelings of fear and confidence, but he quickly qualifies that claim: courage is concerned with fear only in relation to certain things. Rather than delineating those things that fall within the scope of courage, Aristotle mostly points to things that he wishes to exclude from courage's sphere of concern. This series of exclusions seems to respond to the conception of courage that Plato presents in the *Laches*. Aristotle wants a narrower scope for courage than the one elaborated there by Socrates, who says:

I wanted to find out not just what it is to be brave as an infantryman, but also [...] as any kind of member of the forces; and not just what it is to be brave during a war, but to be brave in the face of danger at sea; and I wanted to find out what it is to be brave in the face of an illness, in the face of poverty, and in public life; and what's more not just what it is to be brave in resisting pain or fear, but also in putting up stern opposition to temptation and indulgence... (191d)

This passage grants an exceptionally wide scope for courage, encompassing not only fear in relation to the risks of war, but also of public life, the natural world, and illness. One could even be courageous, on this account, in sticking to one's diet in the face of temptingly delicious baked goods.

Aristotle, by contrast, rules out poverty, illness, and death at sea from the scope of courage (1115a18-19, 28-29). He asserts, "it is wrong to fear poverty or sickness or, in general, [bad things] that are not the results of vice or caused by ourselves" (1115a18-19).² When facing death at sea, the courageous person is fearless not because of courage, but rather, because "he has given up hope of safety" (1115b2). Aristotle's comments suggest his motivation for excluding these things. For Aristotle, virtuous actions must be chosen and this choice must be the result of deliberation (1139a21-1139b5). But poverty, illness, and storms at sea are not things that we can generally choose to subject ourselves to or not; that is, they are not "caused by ourselves." In these cases, the deliberative choice that is central to the exercise of virtue is missing (1105a32-33, Brady 2005, 199). Because of this, Aristotle seems to think that the best we can do in these situations is to passively endure or accept whatever comes our way. For him courage, however, is something more than the serene acceptance of what comes one's way. This is evidenced by his claim that courage calls on us to use our strength (1115b4-5).

Aristotle also excludes several kinds of people from the scope of courage. Citizen soldiers, he claims, are not virtuously courageous, although they can closely resemble the courageous (1116a18-29). While their motivations are good—they aim to avoid shame and gain honor—it seems that they fall short of true courage because these motivations are entirely external. Unlike the truly courageous, citizen soldiers do not stand firm because that is the fine thing to do; rather, they

are concerned with what others think of them. Likewise, soldiers who are compelled to fight also fall short of true courage: they act purely out of fear of their superiors and stand firm only to avoid punishment (1116a30-1116b2). The courageous, Aristotle says, “must be moved by the fine, not by compulsion” (1116b3).

Those with experience handling certain kinds of situations can also appear to be courageous without truly being so; Aristotle singles out foreign mercenaries in this regard (see Irwin's comment: 1999, 213), although he notes that they are not the only ones (1116b5-24). They appear courageous because their experience allows them to better distinguish apparent risks from genuine ones and, furthermore, their experience has allowed them to develop their skills so that they are more capable of handling the situation than the inexperienced. Together, this means that they appear less fearful and more confident than most. When faced with genuine risk, however, Aristotle claims that they fail to stand firm and instead reveal themselves as cowards.

Similarly, those who are hopeful might have only apparent courage (1117a10-16). In particular, those who believe themselves impervious to harm, whether mistakenly or not, may resemble the courageous in their confidence.³ But they lack courage proper. This kind of hopeful person only stands firm because she believes that she is not actually at risk.⁴ When she discovers otherwise, she, like the experienced person just discussed, runs away. In the same vein, the ignorant are not courageous either, for if they stand firm at all, it is because they are unaware of the risks (1117a24-28). Aristotle again contrasts these sorts of superficial confidence with that of the truly courageous who, knowing the risk, stand firm because that is the fine or noble thing to do.

Aristotle also distinguishes the courageous from “those who act on spirit” (1116b25-1117a9). These individuals lack proper courage, he argues, because they act on feeling alone, rather than in accordance with reason. Theirs is the same kind of apparent courage displayed by animals when threatened. In acting from spirit alone, one is reacting in an instinctive or impulsive way,

rather than actively choosing to aim at the fine, as the courageous do. Like the cases of poverty, illness, and death at sea, the deliberative choice required for the exercise of courage is missing in those who act on spirit.

So much for Aristotle's account of what does *not* count as courage. His reasons for eliminating these cases, however, add considerable content to his conception of the virtue: Courage requires a deliberative choice to aim actively at a fine or noble end.⁵ It is, therefore, constitutive of a good human being. Furthermore, the courageous are internally motivated by the fine, not incentivized by external goods or threats. And they are confident in the face of real, genuine risks to themselves.

Aristotle provides only one example of what he considers courage proper: facing death in war (1115a30-35). This, together with his focus on citizen soldiers, foreign mercenaries, and the like has led some scholars to conclude that Aristotle restricts the scope of courage to the risk of life and limb in the context of war. Michelle Brady argues for an even further restriction of the scope of courage: true courage for Aristotle, she contends, is facing death in battle in order to preserve the *polis* (2005, 199). There are a couple of reasons, however, to resist Brady's exceedingly narrow interpretation. First, as she herself acknowledges, Aristotle never explicitly names preserving the *polis* as the only legitimate end for courage. Furthermore, Brady's primary motivation for her interpretation is to explain why Aristotle narrows the scope of courage from the one elaborated in the *Laches* (2005, 199). But as I argued, Aristotle's exclusions can be explained in terms of choice and the ability to show one's strength. So while Brady is surely right that preserving the *polis* counts as a noble end proper to courage, we have no reason to think that it is the *only* such end. That said, there is considerable scholarly disagreement over whether facing death in battle is a definition, an ideal, or merely a paradigmatic example of courage for Aristotle (e.g., Pearson 2009, 126 n9, Pakaluk

2005, 161-64).⁶ His account, therefore, leaves us unsure as to the scope of courage's sphere of concern.

As we have seen, fear is a primary concern of courage. It is not clear in Aristotle's account, however, the extent to which the courageous feel fear. There are two distinct questions here. First, do the courageous experience fear at all, ever? And second, do the courageous experience fear *when exercising courage*? Based on the text, the answer to the first question must be affirmative for at least two reasons: (1) Aristotle says that it is right to fear some things, and so presumably even the courageous will fear those (1115a12); and (2) he recognizes that it is possible to be excessively fearless (1115b25).

The question of whether the courageous experience fear when exercising courage, however, is more challenging. Aristotle describes the courageous person as someone who does not seem to fear very much nor very often, for, he says, "the brave person is unperturbed, as far as a human being can be" (1115b11; see also 1117a18-19). And when giving examples of things that the excessively fearless person fails to (properly) fear, Aristotle mentions only natural phenomena, namely, earthquakes and waves (1115b28), which would seem, like the storms at sea discussed earlier, to fall outside the scope of courage. Perhaps the courageous fear these things, and so are not excessively fearless, yet do not feel fear when exercising courage. On the other hand, Aristotle seems to suggest that the courageous stand firm against things that they *actually* fear: "though he will fear even the sorts of things that are not irresistible, he will stand firm against them, in the right way, as reason prescribes, for the sake of the fine" (1115b12-13). The question, then, is: Does the courageous person fear these things when actively standing firm against them? For all that Aristotle says regarding how the courageous fear appropriately, his descriptions of them as unperturbed, confident, hopeful, and "eager when in action" (1116a9) leave readers unsure as to whether they

experience fear when exercising courage, even if it seems clear that they must experience some fear in other contexts.

This question regarding fear is particularly significant considering Aristotle's distinction between virtue and continence. Although the continent are not fully virtuous, they reliably act in accordance with virtue. Unlike the virtuous, they must overcome contrary desires in order to do so (1152a1-3). While Aristotle explicitly draws the distinction between virtue and continence only in regard to the virtue of temperance (1149a21-24), as Brady points out, temperance and courage are a distinctive pair among Aristotle's virtues: both are virtues of the non-rational parts of the soul, and Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes their similarities (2005, 193). So even if one did not want to extend the distinction to all of the virtues of character as some do (e.g., McDowell 1998), it would seem that the distinction ought to hold in the case of courage. If the courageous experience and must overcome fear in order to act, however, the distinction would be called into question.

Since the courageous fear appropriately, they are also "correspondingly confident."⁷ Aristotle does not say in his ethics what confidence is, but he does discuss it in the *Rhetoric*, where he explains: "[confidence is] expectation of safety accompanied by the impression of it as near, while fearful things either do not exist or are far away. Confidence is inspired by dreadful things being far off and sources of safety being near at hand" (1383a17-20, Pearson's translation, 2009, 123). For Aristotle, then, confidence involves individuals construing themselves as "safe from something they regard as fearful" (Pearson 2009, 124). Given Aristotle's focus on facing death in war (1115a30-35), Giles Pearson must be right that the courageous person's confidence cannot be in her physical safety (2009, 126-29). The key to understanding the courageous person's construal of safety, Pearson contends, is the reason for which the courageous individual stands firm: "because it is fine to stand firm and shameful to fail" (1117a17-18). In standing firm, the courageous construe themselves as safe from disgrace (Pearson 2009, 131). This sounds right: whether or not the courageous actually

experience fear of shame, they can acknowledge shame as something fearful, and construe themselves as safe from it.

Aristotle concludes his discussion of courage by addressing the question of pain and acknowledging that courage may be an exception to his claim that the exercise of virtue is pleasant:

[T]he brave person will find death and wounds painful, and suffer them unwillingly, but he will endure them because that is fine or because failure is shameful. Indeed, the truer it is that he has every virtue and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and knows he is being deprived of the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is fine in war at the cost of all these goods. (1117b8-15)

In themselves, these sentiments sound quite reasonable. The courageous, like the rest of us, find death and wounds painful and would prefer, all things being equal, not to be subjected to them. Indeed, the more virtuous an individual is, the more pain she experiences at the prospect of losing what she recognizes to be a good and worthwhile life.

This passage, however, is hard to square with an earlier remark: “[I]f he stands firm against terrifying situations and enjoys it, or at least does not find it painful, he is brave; if he finds it painful, he is cowardly” (1104b8-9). Here, Aristotle appears to maintain that the courageous do *not* find the exercise of courage painful. This claim, however, does not actually contradict the later passage quoted above. Aristotle insists that the courageous must not find standing firm painful. Consistent with that claim, when he goes on to discuss what the courageous do find painful, standing firm is not included. Rather, what the courageous find painful are death and wounds, on the one hand, and knowledge of the goods of which they are being deprived on the other. Some scholars have taken this discussion of pain as evidence for thinking that the courageous must experience fear, namely, fear of such pain, in the exercise of courage (see Brady 2005, 192-94).

Aristotle’s account of courage leaves some significant issues unresolved. First, we are left without a clear specification of the scope of courage, its sphere of concern. We are also unclear

regarding the extent to which, or even if, the courageous experience fear when exercising courage. And we are left wondering how the distinction between virtue and continence can hold with regard to courage. I turn now to examining how one might go about resolving these issues on Aristotle's behalf.

The Scope of Courage

As mentioned above, some scholars hold that the scope of courage is limited to risk of life and limb in the context of war. I contend that the virtue's scope should not be restricted in this way. First, restricting courage to the context of war goes against Aristotle's own methodology for individuating the virtues. He individuates the virtues according to their objects, not by context (DesLauriers 2002, 144). A virtue's objects are, crucially, the kinds of things that *any* human being will have to respond to or acknowledge; indeed, this is in large part what establishes the objectivity of Aristotle's ethics (see Nussbaum 1988). The scope of courage, therefore, ought not to be restricted to the context of war, since not everyone will be a soldier.

Moreover, if Aristotle intends to restrict courage to risk of life and limb on the battlefield, one would expect him to say just that. Given how his discussion seems to be responding to Plato, one would expect him to be explicit in restricting the scope of courage to the context of war if that was the intention. He has no problem narrowly restricting the scope of other virtues. For instance, he specifies temperance as concerned with bodily pleasures before narrowing the virtue's scope even further (1118a3). In light of the similarities, discussed above, between temperance and courage, as well as the fact that Aristotle's discussion of temperance directly follows his discussion of courage, it is even more surprising that he does not delineate the sphere of concern for courage in terms of 'risk of significant bodily harm' or something along those lines if that is what he had in mind. Instead, Aristotle talks more vaguely about "frightening conditions" or "frightening things."

Perhaps the most decisive consideration in favor of a wider scope, however, is the fact that, like every other virtue of character, courage results from habituation. Indeed, courage is a central example in Aristotle's discussion of habituation: "we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions" (1103b1-2); "the habits of fear or confidence that we acquire, make some of us brave and others cowardly" (1103b16). If one is to become courageous, one must frequently and consistently perform courageous actions, starting at a young age (1103b24). Even setting aside the specific context of war, it is hard to see how this habituation would be achieved if the scope of courage is restricted to risk of life and limb. Asking young people to frequently and consistently risk their lives seems dangerously foolish.

Instead, it seems more plausible that habituating the young would begin by asking them to frequently and consistently take social and emotional risks, as well as less significant physical risks. Perhaps we expect them to refuse to join in cruel or disrespectful behavior, at the risk of being ridiculed, or to be kind to a social outcast, at the risk of being ostracized by their friends. Maybe they stand up to a bully, at the risk of being punched. This sort of habituation seems in line with Aristotle's developmental, learning-by-doing model of virtue acquisition, as well as more fitting to his analogy with craft acquisition than what seems possible on the restricted scope.

Despite Aristotle's extensive use of battlefield examples, both his methodology for individuating the virtues and his account of the acquisition of the virtues of character via habituation appear to favor a wider scope for the virtue of courage. So long as the ends are fine, one's motivation is internal, and the risk one faces is genuine, there seems little reason to think that one cannot be courageous with regard to personal risks, broadly understood: physical, emotional, or social. Moreover, we are social creatures; as such, social and emotional risks can be, in many ways, as significant as the risk of physical harm. So although granting courage a wider scope expands the relevant risks, I do not take that expansion to be trivializing those risks.

The interpretation for which I am arguing, then, may thinly specify the virtue of courage as excellence in responding to or acknowledging fear and confidence in relation to personal risk, where that risk is construed broadly to include physical dangers, personal vulnerabilities, and social risks.⁸ One might worry that this scope is too wide. There are two potential concerns here. First, with personal risk construed this broadly, courage might crowd out other virtues, especially those like wit or good temper, which have decidedly emotional or social aspects. Second, courage might become a kind of omni-present virtue à la practical wisdom: no virtue could be a virtue without courage. There are a few things to say in response to such concerns.

Even with a broad construal of the relevant personal risks, courage will not infringe on the other virtues because it retains a distinctive sphere of concern that does not directly overlap with the spheres that Aristotle specifies for other virtues. Moreover, Aristotle, in line with ancient Greek ethical tradition, holds that the virtues form a kind of unity. There are many versions of the unity doctrine; Terence Irwin distinguishes Aristotle's as 'the reciprocity of the virtues': the virtues may not all be one, but they are integrated to such an extent that to have one virtue fully is to have all of them (1988).⁹ The reciprocity thesis is controversial, and a defense of it is beyond the scope of this paper. It does, however, highlight two important points. First, courage could be crucial to the attainment and exercise of the other virtues without thereby granting it some sort of special status, since all virtues of character would be crucial to all others. Second, even if one thinks that the reciprocity thesis is too bold, any plausible view of the relationship between the virtues must acknowledge that the virtues do not operate in isolation from one another. Thus, the proper exercise of one virtue may, sometimes if not all the time, require other virtues.

Even so, one may worry that this wider scope leaves courage to do all of the heavy lifting: when the going gets tough, exercising any virtue ends up depending solely on courage. Such a view would leave the other virtues looking relatively impotent. Granting the wide scope does not have

this implication, however. To emphasize again the point made above, courage retains a distinctive sphere of concern: fear and confidence in relation to personal risk. Sometimes, the proper exercise of a virtue will entail the assumption of personal risk. For example, when deciding to become a whistleblower one may exercise both honesty and courage. But there will be many other cases that provide a sort of litmus test of one's character yet do not involve the assumption of personal risk. Suppose, for example, someone makes a monetary mistake in your favor, and no one would be the wiser if you fail to speak up. That may be a situation in which the rubber hits the road, so to speak, regarding one's honesty, yet in a way that does not involve the assumption of risk and so does not require the exercise of courage in any robust sense.

One advantage to granting courage this wider scope is that it would make Aristotle's account more appealing to contemporary virtue theorists. Extending the scope beyond the context of war allows the account to acknowledge the wide variety of circumstances in which individuals may face physical risks. These would include familiar high-risk occupations that often serve as contemporary examples of courage, such as firefighter or police officer, as well as, more notably, some cases of pregnancy and childbirth, and certain acts of political dissent or whistle-blowing. They would also include those myriad situations in which individuals spring into action to help others—friends, family, strangers—pulling them from burning buildings, out of rip tides, off subway tracks, away from oncoming traffic, and the like, at extreme risk to themselves. Extending the relevant risks to include the emotional and social allows the account to acknowledge the many other ways in which one can choose to assume personal risks for fine ends, such as the vulnerability that one assumes in confessing one's love for another, or in risking one's reputation or social standing to stand up for someone else.¹⁰ The fact that broadly construing the relevant personal risks allows Aristotle's account to accommodate these kinds of contemporary examples of courage helps to position it as a viable alternative to the prevailing view of courage that one finds in the contemporary literature.

Contemporary accounts often conceive of courage as what has become known as an ‘executive virtue.’ The idea is that, in allowing an individual to face risk and overcome fear, courage allows her to pursue and execute her ends more effectively, whatever those ends may be (Dent 1981, 574, Pears 2004, Shade 2014, 212-15). Understood as an executive virtue, courage is more akin to a psychological skill than a virtue of character, as it can be put to use towards either good or bad ends. This executive view of courage has led some to argue for the possibility of ‘the courageous villain,’¹¹ who maintains her composure in pursuit of her nefarious ends, as well as for the courage of at least some terrorists.¹² As an executive virtue that can be put towards bad ends, courage no longer entails goodness in its possessor. Moreover, on the executive view of courage, attributing someone with courage tells us nothing about that person’s character (cf. Hursthouse 2006a, 101-102).

Of course, for Aristotle, courage requires a fine or noble end. Given his commitment to practical wisdom and to the ways in which the virtuous tend to get things right, the end in question must *actually* be fine or noble, not merely apparently so. Thus, his account has no room for the courageous villain. To use contemporary examples, the cat burglar tiptoeing across the fire escapes 20 stories up is not courageous. Neither, I suspect, are terrorists. Some have suggested that restricting courage to good ends in this way is “a merely verbal manoeuvre” (e.g., Dent 1981, 575), but this dismissal is too quick.

Consider Aristotle’s distinction between cleverness and practical wisdom. The clever are excellent at means-end reasoning, as are the practically wise. But cleverness can be employed towards any end, good or bad, whereas the practically wise have a clear conception of which ends are truly worthwhile. Something similar can be said of the so-called ‘courageous’ villain: she is not courageous, but merely daring. Aristotle himself appears to draw this distinction when he remarks that adulterers, whom he clearly does not consider courageous, “do many daring [*tolmāra*] actions because of lust” (1117a2). Like the truly courageous, the daring person might be skilled at dealing

with feelings of fear and confidence, but, like the merely clever, she lacks an understanding of which ends are truly worthwhile. In that sense, she falls short of excellence in a significant way. The distinction between the courageous and the daring, therefore, is substantive, not merely verbal.

Contemporary theorists should find this a valuable distinction to draw. First, it dismantles the apparent paradox of the courageous villain or courageous terrorist. These questions of attribution have generated the literatures that they have in large part because many find attributing courage to these individuals inappropriate. Distinguishing daring from courage allows us to recognize the psychological skills of the accomplished villain or terrorist without attributing goodness to them. Moreover, restricting the scope of courage to those who have a correct conception of what is worthwhile and who aim at fine or noble ends does not render us incapable of praising those who are (merely) skilled at handling feelings of fear and confidence. Just as we can praise the hedge fund whiz kid as clever without implying that she has some considered view about what constitutes a good life, we can surely praise the BASE jumper as daring without committing ourselves to the view that her pursuit is ethically worthwhile. When we praise individuals as courageous, however, we are claiming something more than that they are skilled at handling feelings of fear and confidence: we are highlighting an aspect of their character that makes them *good*.

There is another restriction on the scope of courage that broadly construing the relevant risks retains, namely, Aristotle's insistence that courage requires genuine, personal risk and therefore also his distinction between courage and serene acceptance. Taking a risk involves making a choice. Merely being exposed to danger—a natural disaster, for example—is not the same as taking a risk because it is not something about which we can make a choice. This is not to say, of course, that in the face of a natural disaster one cannot subsequently make choices and take risks—to help others, say—and thereby exercise courage. In that sense, maintaining the distinction between courage and serene acceptance does not seem out of line with our contemporary sensibilities. Take illness, for

example. I am not sure that we tend to credit someone's serene acceptance of her illness as courageous. Yet, in the face of illness, there are lots of ways in which one might still take risks and exercise courage in relation to that illness: in confronting social stigmas, in deciding to participate in experimental drug trials, or in reaching out to make amends with estranged family members. Retaining this distinction, then, ought not to be a drawback for contemporary theorists, or for the plausibility of Aristotle's account.

Fear and Continenence

The questions of the extent to which, or even if, the courageous experience fear when exercising courage and of how the distinction between virtue and continence might hold in the case of courage are interrelated. The continent, recall, act in accordance with virtue but must overcome desires not to do so. In the case of courage, the primary generator of these contrary desires is fear. So if the courageous feel fear when exercising courage, most take this to mean that the courageous, like the continent, would have to overcome that fear in order to act. The distinction between the virtuous and the continent would therefore vanish: both would have to overcome contrary desires in order to do the virtuous thing (see Stohr 2003).

Unsurprisingly, then, some have argued that we ought to read Aristotle as holding that the courageous do not, in fact, experience fear when exercising courage. Indeed, the most straightforward way to preserve the distinction between virtue and continence would be to argue, as Brady does, that—whatever they may or may not fear in other contexts—the courageous do not feel fear in exercising courage, while the continent feel and overcome fear (2005, see also Zavaliy and Aristidou 2014, 177). Maintaining the distinction, however, does not itself require a commitment to the notion that the courageous never feel fear when exercising courage. Rather, the distinction entails only that *if* the courageous experience fear, that fear cannot be an impetus to act contrary to virtue (see Brady 2005, 193). Perhaps due to our contemporary tendencies to link courage and fear

quite closely (e.g., Rachman 2004), however, some scholars seem to want to find space in Aristotle's account for the courageous to experience fear in the exercise of courage.

Pearson, for instance, argues that the courageous fear shame or disgrace (2009), as Aristotle lists these as things that it is right to fear (1115a12). Howard Curzer contests this reading because, he argues, a disposition to feel shame appropriately is only a virtue—or 'semivirtue' (see Burnyeat 1999, 215)—for those still in the process of acquiring a virtuous character (2012, 22). Pearson anticipates this objection by arguing that *actually* feeling shame is not proper to the courageous, because that would mean that one had voluntarily acted shamefully, but fear of acting shamefully *is*, as it reflects sensitivity to moral concerns (2009, 132 n.18).

Pearson's argument is unsatisfactory. If shame requires *voluntarily* acting contrary to virtue, then the fully virtuous would have no reason to fear it, because they certainly are not in danger of doing *that*. So although the courageous could acknowledge that shame is something that one ought to fear, they seem unlikely ever to be in a position actually to experience such fear. This discussion of shame, however, puts us in the vicinity of something that the courageous could legitimately fear, namely, missing the target of virtue. The idea is not that the courageous fear voluntarily acting contrary to virtue, but rather that they fear, in the particular situation at hand, not getting things right.

Christine Swanton defines hitting the target of virtue as "a form (or forms) of success in the moral acknowledgement of or responsiveness to items in its field or fields, appropriate to the aim of the virtue in a given context" (2001, 38-39). An individual might act from virtue, that is, make a choice that exhibits her excellence of character, yet miss the target of the virtue, in other words, still get things wrong. Given the doctrine of the mean, a virtuous individual will not miss the target of virtue very often, but it may happen occasionally. Take Swanton's example of the virtuous policy maker (2001, 35). As virtuous and practically wise as she may be, the virtuous policy maker is still

subject to the limits of human knowledge. No matter how thoughtful, informed, and virtuously made her decision to enact a particular environmental policy may be, if that policy turns out to be disastrous due to unforeseen consequences, then she has missed the target of virtue.

Given the kinds of risks involved in courage, missing the target of virtue despite one's best efforts will be a real possibility in some cases and, furthermore, a possibility that may be feared. In a situation where one is operating at the limits of one's knowledge or abilities, finds oneself blindsided by unforeseeable circumstances, or is suddenly thrust into a role that one does not usually occupy, the courageous might legitimately fear that their best-informed, virtuously motivated response might yet fall short in some way. Suppose, for example, that a courageous individual with no flight experience suddenly finds that she is the only one capable of attempting an emergency landing of the plane. Since she is courageous, she acts from courage by, among other things, handling her feelings of fear and confidence, and acknowledging the risks and the end involved. Yet whether she hits the target of the virtue by successfully landing the plane might be a matter of significant luck, and it seems perfectly reasonable that she might fear that she will fail to accomplish this.

This fear of missing the target of virtue is likely to be rare, with the exception, perhaps, of those who occupy roles that put themselves more often in the kinds of extreme situations described above. By contrast, most virtuous actions would fail to warrant such fear; practical wisdom ensures that, most of the time, a virtuous individual has a pretty good idea of how to hit the target of virtue. When one donates money to an established charity that has been well rated by independent watchdog organizations, there is no reason to fear missing the target of generosity. This is not to say that one should smugly consider oneself infallible, just that there is nothing actively to fear. Moreover, one can probably exercise one's courage often without experiencing this type of fear. In many cases, one will assume a risk for a fine or noble end, knowing quite well how to achieve that end. The connection between courage and risk, and the kinds of uncertainties such risks can entail,

suggest, however, that if the fear of missing the target of virtue is experienced, it is likely to be in the exercise of courage, including in conjunction with other virtues.

None of the formal features of Aristotle's account appears to preclude this fear. Missing the target of virtue is something "caused by us," and so is not ruled out by Aristotle's account as something improper to fear. Moreover, allowing that the courageous may experience fear of missing the target of virtue would not undermine the distinction between virtue and continence. Although, on this view, both the virtuous and the continent may experience fear, the objects of that fear are different. The continent fear the assumption of risk itself. Their fear makes them reluctant to assume the risk in the way that virtue demands; hence they must overcome their fear in order to act. The courageous, by contrast, are not afraid of assuming the risk. Moreover, their fear of missing the target of virtue in no way provides an impetus to act contrary to virtue, because the surest way for the courageous to miss the target of virtue is to act contrary to virtue. Certainly, then, they will have no desire to do that.

While there may be room in Aristotle's account for fear of missing the target of virtue, such fear is not part of his expressed view. Aristotle never presents the courageous as fearing death, claiming that even in storms at sea and in sickness—situations that he has excluded from the scope of courage—the courageous are fearless (1115b1). And for all of the examples that Aristotle provides, he never portrays the courageous person as experiencing fear when standing firm. There are places in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he acknowledges the vagaries of luck¹³ and the fact that some things are beyond one's control, even for the fully virtuous (e.g., 1100a6-9). So perhaps Aristotle would be willing to acknowledge this fear. His account, however, appears unwavering in its depiction of the courageous as fearless in the exercise of their courage.

Many have found this lack of fear implausible.¹⁴ While a full defense of Aristotle's view is beyond the scope of this paper, let me offer a quick comment in its favor. An individual's attention

is limited; in any given situation, one pays more attention to certain features of a situation than others. Aristotle portrays the courageous individual as wholly focused on her fine or noble end. She is not, therefore, attending to the potential personal costs of standing firm. That is why, I would suggest, she does not experience fear of those costs. Importantly, this kind of selective attention does not entail blindness. For example, when I attend to what my dinner companion is saying in a noisy restaurant, I am not unaware of the people around us. The claim, then, is not that the courageous are or become blind to the risks. Rather, the idea is that, just as I cannot eavesdrop on the tables around us while simultaneously being attentively engaged in conversation with my dining partner, so too the courageous individual cannot be worrying about what she is risking as she actively endeavors to achieve her fine or noble end. The focus is on the task at hand; in the moment there is no head space, so to speak, for fear of the potential costs.¹⁵

One might worry that if the courageous are fearless as Aristotle suggests, then the distinction between the courageous and the rash is lost. The distinction, however, still holds. Aristotle distinguishes the rash from the courageous not in terms of fear, but in terms of confidence: the rash, he consistently claims, are excessively confident (1107b3, 1115b29). Recall that the courageous are confident because they construe themselves as safe from disgrace; they possess this confidence because they know that their end is fine or noble. The rash, by contrast, are not entitled to such confidence, hence their excess. In being overly eager to court any old risk, they demonstrate that they lack the discriminatory wisdom of the courageous to know when it is, indeed, fine to stand firm and when it is not.

Finally, what about Aristotle's comments regarding pain and the exercise of courage? Aristotle's remark that "[t]he brave person is unperturbed, as far as a human being can be" (1115b11) reminds us that the courageous are still, for all of their virtue, human. Of course, then, they will feel the pain of injuries and care about losing their life. Aristotle's omission of 'standing

firm,' however, in his discussion of things that the courageous find painful is, I contend, telling. The courageous do not find standing firm—that is, doing the courageous thing—painful. Moreover, as I have just argued, the prospective pain of death and wounds will not be a source of fear for them. Rather than Aristotle's discussion of pain supporting the view that the courageous experience fear, then, his omission of standing firm from the things that the courageous find painful supports my interpretation of his account.

Aristotle's Account of Courage

The interpretation for which I have argued resolves the issues of Aristotle's account of courage in a way that brings the account into line with his broader views on virtues of character. Broadly construing the relevant personal risks to include physical dangers, personal vulnerabilities, and social risks makes the account consistent with Aristotle's methodology for individuating the virtues and his account of the acquisition of virtue via habituation. While there is limited room in Aristotle's account for the courageous to experience fear in the exercise of courage, such fear is not part of his expressed view, which consistently depicts the courageous as fearless, thereby maintaining the distinction between virtue and continence. I have suggested that this lack of fear may not be as implausible as some have supposed. That, together with the wider scope of relevant risks, means that contemporary virtue theorists may find Aristotle's account a welcome alternative to the prevailing view in the contemporary literature of courage as an executive virtue.¹⁶

Seton Hall University

Keywords: Aristotle, courage, fear, continence, executive virtue

Notes

¹ These would also be the objects of the virtue's related vices.

² I use Terence Irwin's (1999) translation throughout.

³ Aristotle claims that the courageous are both confident and hopeful (1116a3-4).

⁴ I use feminine pronouns throughout, despite the historical fact that Aristotle took himself to be addressing only (Greek) males.

⁵ Aristotle comments that those who respond well in emergencies seem more courageous than those who have advance warning; this kind of immediate response is more revelatory of one's character (1117a17-22). Many have taken this claim to demand an attenuation of the deliberation requirement. John McDowell, for instance, contends that the deliberation requirement can be fulfilled so long as one can reconstruct reasons for acting (1998, 66 n. 22). See also Rosalind Hursthouse (2006b). I am reluctant to attenuate the deliberation requirement in this way, but that discussion falls outside the scope of this paper.

⁶ Brady pulls back from her bolder claim towards the end of the article, conceding that facing death in battle may be the paradigmatic, not only, context for exercising courage (2005, 204).

⁷ Aristotle rightly recognizes that fear and confidence have a certain degree of independence from one another (1115b25-1116a8, see also Rachman 2004, 466-67). Someone who is severely depressed, for instance, could be fearless without being confident. And in Aristotle's example of death at sea the courageous person is fearless "[f]or he has given up hope of safety" (1115b2), suggesting that he is not confident. Although fearlessness and confidence often go together, they need not do so.

⁸ On specifying thin accounts of virtues, see Swanton (2003, 19).

⁹ Aristotle's reciprocity thesis is often presented as more modest than the Socratic unity doctrine, which holds that virtue really is one thing, namely knowledge. Yet it is difficult to say how much more modest the Aristotelian version is, at least as far as questions about individuals possessing virtue are concerned. In either case, a person either has (all of the) virtue(s) or she does not.

¹⁰ Regarding the scope of personal risk, see Putman (2001, 465), Sanford (2010, 443), and Shade (2014, 216-17).

¹¹ See Phillippa Foot's discussion of this question (2009, 14-18).

¹² On whether terrorists can be courageous, see Pears (2004), Kateb (2004, 39), Shade (2014, 215-16), Zavalij and Aristidou (2014, 180).

¹³ Although, some contend, not adequately. See Lisa Tessman (2005).

¹⁴ The notable exception being McDowell (1998). My suggestion in this paragraph is largely in line with his view.

¹⁵ Since the target of virtue *is* firmly in the courageous person's attention, fear of missing of the target of virtue would not be ruled out in the same way.

¹⁶ Thanks to Iakovos Vasiliou, Rosalind Hursthouse, Dan Mailick, Benjamin Miller, and the two reviewers from this journal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

- Brady, Michelle E. 2005. "The Fearlessness of Courage." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 2: 189-211.
- Burnyeat, Myles F. 1999. "Aristotle on Learning to be Good." In *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays*, edited by Nancy Sherman, 205-30. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Curzer, Howard. 2012. "Courage and Continence." In *Aristotle and the Virtues*, 19-64. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dent, Nicholas J. H. 1981. "The Value of Courage." *Philosophy* 56: 574-77.
- DesLauriers, Marguerite. 2002. "How to Distinguish Aristotle's Virtues." *Phronesis* XLVII, no. 2: 101-26.

- Foot, Philippa. 2009. "Virtues and Vices." In *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 1-18. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2006a. "Are Virtues the Proper Starting Point for Morality?" In *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, edited by James Dreier, 99-112. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2006b. "Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106: 283-307.
- Irwin, Terence. 1988. "Disunity in the Aristotelian Virtues." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* suppl: 61-78.
- Irwin, Terence. 1999. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Kateb, George. 2004. "Courage as a Virtue." *Social Research* 71, no. 1: 39-72.
- McDowell, John. 1998. *Mind, Value, and Reality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1988. "Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach." In *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Ethical Theory : Character and Virtue*, edited by P.A. French, T.E. Uehling and H.K. Wettstein, 32-53. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pakaluk, Michael. 2005. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pears, David. 2004. "The Anatomy of Courage." *Social Research* 71, no. 1: 1-12.
- Pearson, Giles. 2009. "Aristotle on the Role of Confidence in Courage." *Ancient Philosophy* 29: 123-37.
- Plato. 1987. "Laches." In *Early Socratic Dialogues*, edited by Trevor J. Saunders, 68-115. Hammondsworth: Penguin.
- Putman, Daniel. 2001. "The Emotions of Courage." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32, no. 4: 463-70.
- Rachman, Stanley J. 2004. "Fear and Courage: A Psychological Perspective." *Social Research* 71, no. 1: 149-76.
- Sanford, Jonathan J. 2010. "Are You Man Enough? Aristotle and Courage." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4: 431-45.
- Shade, Patrick. 2014. "The Ends of Courage." In *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, edited by Stan van Hooft, 210-19. Durham: Acumen Publishing.
- Stohr, Karen E. 2003. "Moral Cacophony: When Continence is a Virtue." *The Journal of Ethics* 7: 339-63.
- Swanton, Christine. 2001. "A Virtue Ethical Account of Right Action." *Ethics* 112, no. 1: 32-52.
- Swanton, Christine. 2003. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tessman, Lisa. 2005. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zavaliy, Andrei G., and Michael Aristidou. 2014. "Courage: A Modern Look at an Ancient Virtue." *Journal of Military Ethics* 13, no. 2: 174-89.